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AUTHOR Donoian, George
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the importance of providing students with a broad humanistic education while, at the same time, maintaining accountability to urban taxpayers. The author describes the contemporary situation of tax revolts, millage defeats, and concern over student proficiency exams, and attributes these phenomena to the public's desire to insure that schools are functioning properly. New curricular techniques are said to represent inadequate responses to educational prolems. Drawing on experience as a Detroit educator, the author proposes six parameters of self development which might spark a renaissance in urban learning and produce students with humanistic qualities. (AP)

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The Renaissance Motif: Humanism for Urban Education

GEORGE DONOIAN, Ed. D.
Business Administrator
Detroit Public Schools

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Introduction

American history abounds with revolt, but the most compelling force traditionally upsetting the people is the matter of taxation. From the start, Americans have rebelled against tyrannical efforts to squeeze more tribute out of them. This is still true today--Proposition 13 has swept eastward from California like an uncontrolled fire. Thus many states have been forced by referendum mandates to enact constitutional amendments limiting the taxing power of local governmental units as well.

In addition to curbing the taxation powers of government, the American people are beginning to question their national priorities. Historically Congressional representatives have approved and appropriated funds for programs (and hardware) without consulting their constituents. Thus by remaining silent on these matters, the people have tacitly endorsed billions being spent for relatively unknown reasons.

Worse yet, when the net worth of certain programs are challenged, meager results are found at best. A case in point is the National Highway Traffic Safety standards for automobiles. Over the last several years, the Federal government has forced the manufacturers to improve and add considerable weight to cars in the form of passenger safety requirements, while at the same time the E.P.A. had demanded clean air by way of emission control devices and improved mileage. Our point is simply this: lowering highway speed has done more to reduce automobile fatalities than all the safety features put on cars in the last

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decade. Yet, the annual highway toll accounts for more than forty thousand lives and includes injury to several million people.

Despite all the rhetoric about traffic safety, conservation of fossil fuels and the deficit balance of trade payments, the highway carnage continues unabated. The humanitarian concern for American blood being spilled on the highways is not important enough for us to react. Should we enter into some hostilities, such as Vietnam, the peaceniks can be heard loudly telling us about 40,000 troops dying in four years. As bad as that is, and we do not want to diminish the value of one life, the annual highway slaughter in the same period was over 220,000 lives and with over eight million hurt seriously in accidents involving drivers who had been drinking or on drugs in about one-half of the cases causing the unchecked destruction.

To return to our initial point, it is to reassert that Americans will withstand almost any discomfort as long as it does not affect them personally or financially.

Target: Education

Since the American public resents being taxed without some accountability, it wants some measure of value derived from taxes paid. Specifically Americans want benefits for everyone so that the taxes are not levied against the majority for the good of the minority.

Hurting them almost daily are announcements of the declining value of U.S. dollar against other national money. With such a dire backdrop, it is no wonder that the American public has seized on the one great expense over which it has

some control--education. Billions of dollars are spent for education annually as school administrators and board members remind the paying public that its tax dollars are, in reality, investment for the future of young Americans. However, tax-ladened citizens have not cottoned to this story line, despite the fact that schooling is the best use of tax monies as an investment payoff.* Because this angry constituency has approval authority as to how much money it wants to assess itself, it is in this combat zone that school millage campaigns are so often defeated--especially by parents of children who would benefit most by school program and building improvements. This revolt is not so much a lack of endorsement of education as it is an expression of a free-floating anger aimed at anyone who would dare raise taxes. Worse yet, in urban centers such as Detroit where municipal services costs are exceedingly high, the school tax burden adds another thirty plus mills to city taxes which are already at about fifty mills!

More poignantly the issue of taxation leads the public to demands for accountability. The public understands and reluctantly expects educational costs to rise like everything else. Property owners and particularly parents want results for the salaries paid to teachers (who consider themselves professional). Since such salaries are paid for high-level work, just where are the corresponding results? If teachers are to teach, then teaching should lead to learning. Not so, says the public emphatically! Whatever some teachers are doing, it is not teaching because too many students cannot do simple math, write

*With a four-fold increase of the national debt in sixteen years from 100 billion ot 400 billion dollars in 1978. Education USA, page 189.

legibly or read effectively. Worse yet, some students do not show any hint of having been to school at all, cite angry parents at board meetings. As harsh as all this sounds, the sad truth is that some students do fit these descriptions. Of course, the public perception and feelings are real and pervasive. These "facts," alone, are enough to arouse the dismayed public and more importantly to do something about them. Thus battle lines are drawn and urban parents are most explicit about their expectations from the schools.

Current Responses to Public Criticism

As an urban educator for over twenty-five years, I have been both a witness to and a participant in the educational process. In that time, I have seen the rise and fall of many tides upon which American education has ridden --accountability as the most current wave has brought many responses that include objective-referenced testing, teaching by objectives, diagnostic-prescriptive teaching and a whole host of trendy notions which like other past responses (classroom TV, team teaching, ability grouping, etc.) will hold off the public for a while.

While these catchy "innovations" have stalled the dissatisfied public in the past, I believe this time it is different. The public will not be thwarted easily by our new crop of "program priorities." For example, the current movement calling for high school competency skills expects students to demonstrate that twelve years of attendance (and hopefully, education) have an effect--students should not only claim that their long tenure under the tutelage of teachers has had a definite impact upon them, but also demonstrate it with facts.*

*Schools in State of Virginia will be issuing four different high school diplomas to graduating seniors based upon their competency testing plan.

The Detroit Scene

In this respect we in Detroit have devised a series of lessons which purport to aid senior high students move effectively into the adult world with Practical Life Skills (P.L.S.) upon graduation. This effort has had impact upon some other areas of the curriculum which, hopefully, will be more permanently implanted in the teaching/learning scheme of every high school. The first testing will occur this year for eleventh graders as an experimental start.

We are busy at the middle school level as well. Staff members and community people are completing a set of criteria for specific skills to validate the effect of schooling as a measure of teaching effort.

While at the elementary level the D.O.R.T.--the Detroit Objective-Referenced Tests which both diagnose and measure achievement in reading and mathematics skills have been formulated to assess teaching and learning for the lower grades. This too has been effectively implemented with definite results.

Overall we in Detroit have been for several years making school plans--yearly, monthly, weekly and daily plans systematically and diligently. The net result has been noteworthy: we have stemmed the downward spiral of achievement scores in all areas and better yet, the scores are beginning to rise again. Steadily, but not dramatically, they are beginning to inch up each year as we approach or exceed national means. (At the secondary level the downward spiral has just been arrested.)

With these positive results to point out to the taxpaying public, the Detroit Board of Education was able to sell an extra two and a quarter mills approval for operations last year--a signal public endorsement that schools

were improving.

Emphasizing Cognitive Learning

There has been a definite payoff--focusing upon cognitive teaching and learning has had decided effect. Let us not rejoice so quickly in Detroit, however. There is ample research evidence to demonstrate that regression can and will set in when parents, teachers and students get tired of the stress on skills and knowledge acquisition at the grave neglect of the affective and psychomotor learning domains.

One need only to look at computer-based education coursetexts to see how thoroughly cognitive the curriculum has become. What makes this situation more problematic is the degree of commitment urban schools districts have defensively embraced the cognitive realm at almost the near absence of anything affective or otherwise. We admit that computer courses are certainly intriguing and hold sway over some youth who enjoy the novelty and mastery over new material, but let this heavy dosage of cognitive learning continue and become intensified, then ask graduating seniors about their attitudes toward sheer "facts learning." Once invited to express their honest feelings, the departing students will tell you startling tales about the shortcomings of their education. Without "picking on" computer science or mathematics teachers specifically, one will discover the effects of exact sciences and procedures being trumped over and over again. Where standards of performance take on the greatest importance and where achievement is not regarded as a process, but more precisely as a product with its own intrinsic value, urban education (or for that matter, rural or suburban education as well) loses its relevance and raises itself above all. In this "exulted" position, cognitive learning becomes an untouchable--unrewardingly

demanding, and finally inhuman, lacking sensitivity to student needs and perceptions.

Prediction of Things to Come

It is this writer's purpose to forecast that as present trends continue in urban education, the stress on cognitive teaching and learning as exemplified in the sciences, including computer-based instruction will logically and inevitably lead our students to reject and rebel against our defensive measures to redeem ourselves as educators. As we continue our pressurized ways to get students to achieve and thereby justify our presence and positions in schools, we will pay dearly for having been so "unbalanced" in our curriculum. For without any humanistic studies to offset the heavy dosage of cognitive learning, our students will be denied some fundamental skills, knowledge and attitudes which could help them to be better people, especially as we look to the next decade with the burgeoning use of computers* taking over human effort. Depersonalization of society may be inevitable, but the schools should not be accelerating nor promoting this process by training the next generation of adults to accept, enjoy and function without affective substance. Urban education, therefore, stands at this very threshold of progress and responsibility--in what ways we respond and fulfill our primary mission will affect the whole fabric of public education in America as we close out this century and begin a new one.

Analysis of Current Curricular Problems of Urban Education

In the headlong pursuit of achievement for urban youth, the schools have almost forgotten to ask some fundamental questions about the content and methods

*See A.E.D.S. 17th Annual Conference Proceedings, "Humanism for the Computer Age in Education: Planning for Man/Machine Synchronicity," by George Donoian, pp. 321-24, 1979.

which have recently been introduced into schools. The quest for cognitive mastery has not been all that "bad," but it has left some questions unanswered and created a great deal of uneasiness about the so-called success of the achievement orientation along with the systems approach to learning. One of the pressing issues has been that of relevancy. What materials and what methods seem to produce the best results? What values do they engender? And for whom?

In reaching for answers, too many of our urban colleagues have lost sight of the students' needs, wants, wishes and interests. Thus the system is the end and not the means for accomplishing the mission. Since cognitive teaching lends itself to easy description and more mechanical manipulations, we find that in computer-based education, for example, a general absence of values clarification, humanistic touches and other affective thema. Although this progress is not altogether devastating, it is heavily loaded with subject matter mastery. Achievement will undoubtedly be realized, but at what price?

Neither do we want the preoccupation of our efforts to prevent us from making improvements in our teaching/learning systems. The "philosophers" among us urban educators could gum up the works and hold up our progress with their incessant questions, thus preventing all of us from moving forward with accomplishing our goals.

Whatever becomes the content of our curriculum will inevitably have meaning and value as long as our choices are made with some sound criteria and based upon professional judgment. The late Swiss psychiatrist Karl G. Jung would have asserted that the concept of synchronicity* would prevail in any case, as long as we had

*PP. 22-3, Progoff, Ira, Jung, Synchronicity and Human Destiny: Non Causal Dimensions of Human Experience, Delta Publishing Company, New York, 1973.

provided some time and space for students to explore, discuss and formulate their own conclusions. Student discoveries and insights would, indeed, be the real sources for meaning and not necessarily the significance ascribed to learning experiences as teachers would attribute to them In the final analysis, the values derived by an education are personal constructs rather than those provided by the purveyor of knowledge--the teacher or the books.

Therefore, any procedure which impedes students from acquiring an education through teachers' rhetoric explorations cannot help, but hinder or if worse yet, prevent the educative process from occurring. Therefore, to spend untold hours pondering the possible meanings, values, and ultimate significance are not the ways of getting the job done--teaching for learning; learning for achievement; and achievement for an education.

Another moot issue our urban scholar-teachers raise is the matter of form (and not the function) of all the necessary skills and concepts. Another real issue is not when or where these should be introduced, reinforced and mastered as is the concern of how do they fit. It would be forever if everyone finally agreed to all of the questions asked about the fitness of the curriculum parameters. Somehow the "philosophers" would hold out for a totally symmetrical relationship. However, this goal would be useless because in the meantime, the task of teaching is being avoided or subverted, at best. Educating is a process of student refinement, of increasing their sophistication, of explaining to them the complex in understandable terms, of having them explore the unknown, converting it into known, of their making what seems isolated as integrated, whole and complete, of filling in their gaps of knowledge.

Further complicating this issue of urban education with its emphasis upon cognitive learning is the matter of curricular linearity, i.e., the relationship of skills and knowledge as they affect the future educational needs of our students. While the responsibility is placed squarely upon the teachers now for the courses to be taught, how do these studies contribute to and prepare students for more advanced education? Or are we guilty of being protectionistic about our own survival and can we let the chips fall where they may for next year and thereafter?

It seems most important that what we are stressing today should have a direct bearing upon students' education next year and the future. Why shouldn't there be continuity and relevance in today's curriculum? Why shouldn't there be some synergistic qualities in our curricular offerings so that students can be expected to grow, say, to solve more complex mathematics? Or to expand their social studies horizons beyond their immediate neighborhoods so that they can analyze and solve more global problems, after all we profess about the brotherhood of mankind?

Urban education is burdened with its task to demonstrate how viable and accessible it is that it fails to pay attention to the uneven path it is directed by being reactive to the consumer public. What urban educators should be concerned about and working for diligently are the minimal expectations of any well-formulated curriculum as characterized by the following:

1. That the content is relevant to the times and for the students with a perspective of the past and design for the future.

2. That students' learning experiences contribute to their education today and for the coming years.

Henry Thoreau commenting on the results wrought by a humanistic education said what we mean most succinctly with:

> It is something to be able to paint a picture,
> or to carve a statue, and so to make
> a few objects beautiful. But it is
> far more glorious to carve and paint
> the atmosphere in which we work,
> to affect the quality of the day--
> this is the highest of the arts.*

All that we hope to propose must have the hallmarks of a humanistic education if we are to produce good students and good citizens who will be able to function effectively as the future generation.

Humanism for Urban Education - The First Art

Admittedly we are engaged in an educational process stressing the importance of achievement for all--an egalitarian idea which we urban educators believe is true. However, the Renaissance Motif has not taken hold and does not seem to be driving the schools toward an inevitable place of eminence, that is, providing an education for all to become a universal being. Therein lies the problem--the disparity between the common man becoming an uncommon through study, travel, work, and service.

Merely providing transistory school achievement opportunities cannot produce lasting Renaissance qualities and values in our students who must survive and hopefully, thrive in a world environment with shrinking resources, international hostilities, economic upheavals and advancing technologies. We urban educators in

*P. 81, Thoreau, Henry, Walden, Modern Library, New York, 1965.

particular have a major obligation that goes beyond just being professional--there needs to be a mission of greater importance. I refer to the Renaissance period which awakened and hastened humanity's lifelines following the Dark Ages and thereby quickened the need for personal knowledge, freedom and fulfillment of capabilities. Indeed the process began modestly and almost inauspiciously with King John signing the Magna Carta on the plains of Runnymede in 1215 A.D. Surely this event had many predisposing events and many yet to come before human rights as we enjoy them became realities in these United States, especially.

Bloodshed, wars and destruction of property have been the ultimate price tags for establishing and guaranteeing the inalienable rights we cherish while other people around the world have yet to achieve. While we have earned ours by difficult means, we stand to lose some if each generation does not reaffirm these freedoms. This is accomplished by teaching values and history to pass on to our political and personal heritage.

Urban education is no different. It is at the forefront of that movement to safeguard those rights of the coming generations. We do not need another million years of struggle to discover the efficacy of an educative process as the means of improving mankind and establishing the wisdom to do something about it. We are there now and we must act now to make great inroads toward humanism as the first art.

The Renaissance Motif

What must we do to bring about a Renaissance in our midst? How will we recognize a rebirth of spirit in urban American schools? All that we propose must have the hallmarks of a humanistic education if we are to be producing good

students and good citizens who will be functioning effectively in a world of problems seeking answers.

For urban education to be humane, we need more than a flurry of activity directed at teaching students to achieve cognitively. That is simply quantitative. An achievement campaign is only the opening thrust of a Renaissance with its pursuit of vast amounts of knowledge. Urban education will easily experience success in demonstrating that city children can, will and do learn like all others.

However, the Renaissance Motif calls for much more. This humanistic push requires an imaginative response from us to broaden our students' horizons along with their expanded base of knowledge and skills. For students there must be increased offerings and learning experiences which introduce and enhance their literary, artistic and cultural lives and not at the neglect of their scientific knowledge if our students are to become universal beings during this modern Renaissance.

It might be best to turn back to the early thirteenth century for clues to questions regarding the conditions prevailing at the time which provided the motivating elan that "persuaded" King John to sign the Magna Carta.

The Dark Ages were indeed dark in almost every way. Serfdom was the predominant means of governance imposed by the state and the church. An individual had no personal rights and he existed for the benefit of the church and/or the state. If his nation or province was being invaded, he was conscripted against his will which for the government did not exist.

Since serfdom in peacetime meant work-then work it was, from sun up to sundown for the good of the lord, be it the earthly one or otherwise.

There was no occasion to ask them whether you preferred to be carpenter, a wheelwright or blacksmith. Whatever was required dictated the vocational education an individual got as limited it as was.

What an individual needed to know was his vocational skills and how to take oral directions. Whatever else was required to know, either the state or the church would furnish the knowledge and information.

The need-to-know basis for scientific information was limited and not necessary for survival or defense, therefore, there was no reason to ask why and how things happened, and much less about the affairs of state or the church.

Gutenberg's movable type, the transatlantic explorations and the quest for knowledge beyond one's sources helped change the nature of people from docile, resigned serfs to revolting mobs burning Paris, and attacking British troops at Concord. Of course, we are talking about a progressive process that gathered mass and momentum--a cultural and technological watershed came rushing out of its bounds in an uncontrolled manner. The educative process was, indeed, like a grass fire consuming everything in its path.

We cannot equate the previous Renaissance to the one which, we believe, is upon us now. In that respect we certainly hope that this present-day one does not require spilling blood and all that which defies any semblance of humanity in the face of all the wars, oppression and tyranny that man painfully experienced since that enlightenment period began. On the contrary, too many predisposing factors prevail today which cannot return us to the Dark Ages to start anew. Therefore, it is our task as urban educators to pick up the torch of learning and move forward dramatically.

Humanism for Urban Education

In addition to our conviction and commitment that urban children and youth can learn, we educators must provide for a greatly expanded curriculum which will be the basis for a humanistic education. In short, the quantitative aspect of our proposed studies will require more resources and an imaginative use of the ones we already have available to us. Therefore, the content issue is settled. By increasing learning opportunities and materials we will be exposing and introducing our students to more than a few textbooks as the curriculum of humanism.

More significant than the extent of our offerings is the matter of our methodology and philosophies from which springs the essence of humanism. What must we do to be certain that our humanistic motives permeate and saturate the curriculum? How do we guarantee a humanistic education, one which promotes the development of the Renaissance Motif preparing everyone to be a universal being? I believe that there are, at least, the following six requirements for a humanistic program of instruction:

First the curriculum, school, staff and society must be geared up to serve the centrality of every human being and his self-development by providing for students' active participation in the design and direction of the curriculum. For as a long as students are prevented from exercising some choices, then they are relegated to a passive mode or approach to learning. If we urban educators cherish an active involvement on the part of students as learners, then we must bravely provide them with numerous opportunities to develop and practice their skills in exploration, random discoveries, and analysis and synthesis. They should be able to think critically and possess study skills we have taught them so that they can arrive at their own conclusions and solutions, and furthermore, the courage and desire to tackle new problems.

Secondly, we must operationalize the imperative that as humanistic teachers we cherish students' purposes and perceptions equal to our own. We must give up most of our long-held beliefs that we know better than they about what may be good for them to know. Perhaps it has been this factor which we have conveniently equated as "lack of motivation" on their part. What if we turned it around and allowed our students to study the content which they themselves see fit for their purposes? Maybe we would witness a quantum increase in motivation and learning--a veritable revolution in achievement which has intrinsic value rather than offering them external goodies such as good marks.

Just as it was for the first Renaissance, infallibility must give way and be replaced by variability in the humanistic curriculum for our present-day scholars to become humanists. Logical inquiry and defense of any issue will depend upon the skills we teach. Our students will know that there are two sides to any question.

How much more learning can take place when our students skilled in debate and argumentation can engage in lively mock courts and other practice sessions for employing their talents?

Next, our humanism must reach beyond the narrow confines of our own time parameters. Truly, humanism embraces a time management which keeps the students' own purposes and perceptions at the very core of their education, not our own directives. What we perceive as adequate learning time may not be so to our students who are the learners. Therefore, we urban teachers must be ready to dwell upon a unit of study longer than we had planned because the learners may be enraptured by it or that students feel it has not been adequately dealt with in depth, therefore, requiring several more weeks of study.

Fifth, in keeping with students' purposes, perceptions and time management, we ought to be certain that their personal wisdom is respected and honored, since we already know student excursions into the world of self-directed learning are the most poignant ones. And yet today we often discourage and penalize students for doing just that because they deviate from our plans and semester designs to cover a curriculum that is usually sterile, deadly and most likely, useless.

Instead, we should be wondering how as urban educators dedicated to humanism we can send our students onto wide-ranging cerebral trips seeking the obscure, the trivia, and useless bits of information which will provide them with significant knowledge, answers to difficult questions and solutions to their problems.

And finally, the value of a humanistic education has got to be in sharing it with one's fellows. Vocationally, too, its utility is measured by our students who make use of it in the marketplace and the ego-enhancing qualities humanism education bestows upon its recipients, not the least of which is satisfaction of working and a lifetime of service to others, be it in the arts or sciences.

Conclusion

For I believe that urban education is at the crossroads today where it must decide its own future. It cannot continue to present excuses, reasons and catchy notions about how it is attempting to overcome urban problems. One such way out of this dilemma is to be preoccupied with teaching for the sake of achievement--a major step out of the quagmire. However, this effort is insufficient to carry urban education beyond its initial point toward humanism.

I have proposed that urban education must be quickened to a pace, to a point where it resembles a second Renaissance that includes a philosophic outlook

embracing the following six parameters comprising a reawakening in teaching and learning:

1. That every student is involved actively as a learner,
2. That each student's learning purposes and perception be respected,
3. That variability not infallibility dictates our teaching designs and hence our students' learnings,
4. That the students' time management is more relevant than the teachers' own chronologic limitations,
5. That student judgment and wisdom should prevail over the teacher's when we are determining the what, how and why of learning, and finally,
6. That the ultimate value of a humanistic education is in its use for self-enhancement and for work as service to oneself and others employing a foundation of learning in both the arts and sciences.

We will be able to witness a second Renaissance when our urban schools operate with these six characteristics as the epicenter of a humanistic education. This greatly expanded curriculum will permit our children to have freedom of choice, personal dignity, and increased knowledge and skills befitting universal beings who are equally at home in the arts as well as the sciences. Truly modern-day Renaissance people.

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